

**Marilyn Sass-Lehrer**, PhD, is a professor of education at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. She received her master's degree in deaf education from New York University and her doctorate from the University of Maryland in early childhood education and curriculum and instruction. Sass-Lehrer has worked as a teacher and early intervention specialist in a variety of educational settings. She is a co-author of *Parents and Their Deaf Children: The Early Years*, and co-editor of *The Young Deaf or Hard of Hearing Child: A Family-Centered Approach to Early Education*.



**Beth S. Benedict**, PhD, a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Gallaudet University, has focused on family involvement in schools with deaf and hard of hearing children, early childhood education, advocacy, early communication, and partnerships between deaf and hearing professionals and early intervention programs and services. Her work has been shared in numerous publications, and she has presented both nationally and internationally.



# preparing professionals to work with infants, toddlers, and their families:

## A HYBRID APPROACH TO LEARNING

By Marilyn Sass-Lehrer, Beth S. Benedict, and Nicole Hutchinson

Specialists who have been prepared to work with infants and toddlers who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families are hard to find. As a result of the effectiveness of Newborn Hearing Screening Programs, there has been a rapid growth in the number of young children needing early intervention services (White, 2006). The number of infants identified as deaf or hard of hearing has doubled in the last decade, accounting for two to three infants for every 1,000 births or between 8,000-12,000 infants annually (<http://infanthearing.org/resources/fact.pdf>). Many programs struggle to find adequately prepared professionals (Marge & Marge, 2005; White, 2006).

A shortage of well-prepared professionals imposes limits on access to comprehensive and effective early intervention services to deaf and hard of hearing children (JCIH, 2007). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) expects states to ensure that professionals working with infants and toddlers have relevant skills (Winton, McCollum, & Catlett, 2008), however, there are very few university programs that provide specialized preparation for working with children who are deaf or hard of hearing (Jones & Ewing, 2002; Rice & Lenihan, 2005; Sass-Lehrer et al., 2010). Many professionals begin their work with limited experiences with this population and depend upon workshops and conferences to acquire the information they need (Sass-Lehrer et al., 2010). Unfortunately, this approach to learning is not ideal and often results in significant gaps and misunderstandings.

Gallaudet University developed an innovative approach to address the need for more well-prepared professionals to work with young children and their families. In the summer of 2007, the Burstein Leadership Institute, under the College of Professional Studies and Outreach at Gallaudet University, launched the Early Education Professional Leadership Certificate Program with a cohort of 12 students. This initial on-line certification program included a series of four courses that were offered for PST credit (professional development credit). Students received a certificate from the

Photos by John T. Consoli



PHOTO BY CHRIS KABUSK

College of Professional Studies and Outreach after successful completion of the four-course sequence of studies.

Beginning in the summer of 2011, an expanded version of the program will be offered as a graduate certificate program. This newly revised program will be known as the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and Families: Collaboration and Leadership Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program. Participants in the initial program evaluated their experiences positively and said that they were able to apply what they had learned to their daily work. However, some students indicated that they would like more, and in the years after the development of the certificate program the program directors decided to review and revise the initial program. The newly revised program includes an emphasis on how to work as a member of an interdisciplinary team.

The certificate program addresses the following areas of need:

- The shortage of knowledgeable professionals with expertise in working with infants, toddlers, and their families
- The lack of professionals who are themselves deaf or hard of hearing

- The need for professionals who have knowledge and skills in a range of disciplinary areas
- The barriers to training that early education service personnel may experience, such as distances from learning centers

### **Increasing the Number of Deaf Professionals**

Parents and caregivers whose babies are deaf or hard of hearing interact with many specialists over the course of the first months and years of their child's life. These specialists include health care professionals, audiologists, service coordinators from the state early intervention systems, and early intervention specialists. Many families also work with speech-language pathologists, social workers, mental health counselors, and psychologists. The vast majority of these professionals lack experiences with deaf and hard of hearing people, and are therefore unable to help parents understand what it means to be deaf. Professionals who are deaf and hard of hearing are essential to the interdisciplinary team of service providers (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer, 2007; Benedict et al., 2011).



**Nicole Hutchinson**

received her bachelor's degree from the University of California, San Diego in linguistics (American Sign Language). She is a graduate student at Gallaudet University and will graduate in May 2011 with a master's degree in deaf education with a specialization in family-centered early education. Hutchinson has been actively involved in the development of the new on-line certificate program.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at *Marilyn.Sass-Lehrer@gallaudet.edu*, *Beth.Benedict@gallaudet.edu*, and *Nicole.Hutchinson@gallaudet.edu*, respectively.



The guidance that the family receives from professionals can have a dramatic impact on families' responses and the decisions they make (Beazley & Moore, 1995; Eleweke & Rodda, 2000; Young & Tattersall, 2007). For example, if professionals communicate to parents and caregivers that being deaf or hard of hearing is a tragedy, they are likely to feel sad or grieve. On the other hand, parents who are provided with opportunities to get to know deaf people tend to be more optimistic about their child's future and have a better understanding of both the joys and challenges that lie ahead (Hintermair, 2000, 2006; Watkins, Pittman, & Walden, 1998).

Despite the evidence that outcomes are better when infants, toddlers, and their families have meaningful interactions with deaf or hard of hearing adults, there are very few trained specialists who are deaf or hard of hearing. One parent describes the power of working closely with deaf people this way:

*My son was the first deaf person I ever met. As a family we embraced Deaf culture, American Sign Language, deaf role models, and deaf families early in his life.*

*He grew to become a confident, highly educated, tolerant, and patient adult. I am grateful and proud as I reflect on how enriched our lives have become. (Benedict et al., 2011)*

Since the inception of the certificate program, the participants have included professionals from different backgrounds, parents of deaf children, and people who are deaf or who have roots in the Deaf community. The program has also attracted professionals who are newcomers to the field with limited experiences with deaf people. Participants include professionals who are deaf educators, linguists, special educators, counselors and others from health care fields, as well as those who are involved in administration and policy work. Having participants from such diverse backgrounds and varied degrees of hearing loss has resulted in positive outcomes. The deaf and hard of hearing professionals trained through this program become role models for the families they subsequently meet. The participants who are hearing develop an appreciation for the importance of including deaf or hard of hearing professionals on the interdisciplinary team, and develop a network of Deaf

community resources through their participation in the program.

### **Interdisciplinary Preparation**

Recent developments in research and technology have resulted in new demands on professionals with knowledge and skills from a range of disciplinary areas. The role of professionals working with infants, toddlers, and their families has become increasingly complex. Early intervention specialists are consultants, collaborators, family educators, and developmental and language specialists. Families with young children who have developmental challenges underscore the importance of having a team of experts who understand how to work together to provide for their child's and family's needs (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, & Sass-Lehrer, 2003). It is unrealistic to expect a professional prepared in one discipline (e.g., education, speech-language pathology) to be an expert in all areas. Instead, professionals must be prepared to work in collaboration with other professionals who have expertise in other disciplinary areas. Interdisciplinary training prepares graduates with the knowledge and skills to work in

collaboration with others on an interdisciplinary team. Professionals who take part in interdisciplinary experiences as part of their training are likely to provide interdisciplinary collaborative services to children and their families (Mellon & Winton, 2003).

Interdisciplinary personnel preparation involves collaboration and the inclusion of two or more disciplines such as counseling, deaf education, early childhood special education, speech-language pathology, social work, and psychology. Developing an interdisciplinary program of studies is challenging in a university that has a traditional departmental or division structure (Kilgo & Bruder, 1997). Professional preparation programs are often limited by requirements from their respective accreditation bodies with little flexibility to allow for additional coursework and experiences. Courses are typically offered through one department and are rarely co-taught. University policies and accountability inadvertently often lead to competition among programs rather than collaboration.

Although the initial program included elements of an interdisciplinary approach, the program directors recognized the need to extend and expand interdisciplinary experiences. To do this, an advisory council of experts on and off campus was established to guide the conceptualization of program development work. The advisory council included parents of deaf children, a pediatrician with expertise in working with deaf children, a developmental specialist who has developed on-line programming in early intervention for children with developmental disabilities and delays, and others. The program directors also established an Interdisciplinary Work Group of professionals from the University community, including experts and practitioners from the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center as well

as faculty from the following program areas: American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Studies; Communication Studies; Counseling; Education; Hearing, Speech, and Language Sciences; Linguistics; Psychology; and Social Work. The Interdisciplinary Work Group met biweekly (and later weekly) to develop the new Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and Families Certificate Program that included the perspectives from the above disciplines as they apply to working with infants, toddlers, and their families.

This work group experience was vital to the strengthening of the interdisciplinary nature of the program. Faculty involved in the development of this new interdisciplinary program found the work both enriching and challenging. Discussions stretched their understanding of new concepts and perspectives. They discovered that professional jargon specific to one professional discipline was not always understood in the same way by those from other specialty areas, and agreed upon common language that helped to promote communication across disciplines (Weston, 2005). They discussed theoretical perspectives to arrive at a shared understanding of the principles that

would frame the revised program development efforts. They also shared their respective knowledge with others in the group.

One example of this type of debate is a series of discussions the work group had on the concepts of *diversity* and *multiculturalism*. Each individual brought his or her own understanding of these concepts to the table. One of the members of the work group had extensive expertise in this area and provided the guidance needed to develop a program of studies that embraced the principles of diversity.

In another example, one of the members of the interdisciplinary work group preferred to use family-first language in the program documents while others proposed child-first language. This difference popped up on several occasions during discussions about the philosophy and learning outcomes of the program as well as related to the name of the program (e.g., Should “Families with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants and Toddlers” be used or “Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families”? ). Group discussions revealed that the emphasis on families was needed in some professional disciplines (e.g., speech-language pathology) that have traditionally focused on the child and minimized the role of parents/caregivers, while others believed it was necessary to communicate that the family’s role is to support the needs of their child and, therefore, the focus needs to be on the child. This discussion gave work group members a better understanding of their own, as well as other, disciplines and perspectives.

Discipline-specific expertise was also an important topic of discussion. For example, members of the Interdisciplinary Work Group discussed limitations on their respective areas of expertise. Some were concerned about the extent to which it was appropriate for one professional to assume





responsibilities traditionally restricted to a professional licensed in another area such as social work, counseling, or speech-language pathology without exceeding professional boundaries. To address this potential problem, a unit of instruction on both the roles and expertise of various professionals and professional standards, scope of practice, and ethical behaviors was added.

As a result of the multiple perspectives and the areas of expertise reflected during the program revision process, the new program is truly interdisciplinary in its scope and approach as well as in its emphasis on collaboration with other professionals.

#### **On-line Learning**

Traditionally, a significant barrier to the preparation of professionals for this specialized area has been access to learning. The vast majority of potential learners are currently employed, and therefore unable to relocate or take off significant time to attend a program of studies that is on a university campus. Until recently, many learners faced significant technological barriers in pursuit of on-line learning.

Developments in on-line teaching and learning strategies, as well as improvements in technology, have made on-line learning a more interactive and dynamic learning process than ever before. Access to high-speed Internet and visual technologies have also provided more opportunities for both instructors and learners to use face-to-face communication so that instruction can be delivered through both ASL and

English print. Learners—hearing, deaf, or hard of hearing—are not dependent upon classroom interpreters to ensure that everyone has access to the content and course activities, and they can participate fully in class discussions.

As a result of these technological advances, the program has been designed to be conducted through on-line learning, including two short on-campus seminars. This has greatly increased the number and diversity of potential participants, while also affording them the opportunity to interact face to face during the brief on-campus seminars.

#### **Expansion of Course Content**

During the review process, many strengths of the content covered in the initial program were identified. Areas that needed to be addressed in more depth included:

- Stronger training for professionals to fully support the development of young children's early language and communication skills

- Additional attention to the areas of listening and spoken language development and the assistive listening technologies that are widely used
- Opportunities for learners in the program to apply the knowledge acquired in their coursework to their work with infants, toddlers, and families (if they did not already have this experience)

In response to these gaps, the revised program has expanded coursework in language and communication and the opportunity for a capstone experience that might include a field experience or mentoring project to help learners implement strategies they are acquiring through their coursework.

#### **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and Families: Collaboration and Leadership Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program**

The reworked and renamed program beginning in May 2011 is an interdisciplinary program designed for professionals from different disciplinary fields. These professionals will learn how to apply their unique professional area of expertise to early intervention as well as how to implement an interdisciplinary team approach. The teaching and learning strategies include both ASL and English for optimal access for learners who are deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing. The critical role and contributions of

## **Burstein Leadership Institute**

The Burstein Leadership Institute (formerly the Gallaudet Leadership Institute) provided support to establish an on-line certificate program. The Burstein Leadership Institute "...is a comprehensive unit of the College of Professional Studies and Outreach dedicated to improving the quality of the personal and professional lives of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, by developing the leadership abilities of these individuals, their families, and other individuals in their immediate and extended personal and professional communities, and (2) developing and enhancing the professional and leadership abilities of individuals who administer programs and services in deaf-centric and for-profit agencies and corporations." (Burstein Leadership Institute, 2010)

# **DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INFANTS, TODDLERS AND FAMILIES: COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP INTERDISCIPLINARY GRADUATE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM**

All courses are being offered for professional studies credit  
and graduate credit.

This is a 6-course (18-credit) graduate certificate program that provides professionals with current evidence-based knowledge and skills for working with families and their very young children who are deaf or hard of hearing. The content and teaching of the program is interdisciplinary and focuses on: professional and ethical practices, communication and language(s), families, and developmental assessment and programming. All courses will be co-taught by two professionals from different disciplines. Candidates will acquire leadership, advocacy, and collaboration skills that promote age and developmentally appropriate outcomes for infants and toddlers. Upon completion of the program, candidates will receive a certificate of completion.

<b>Course 1</b>	<b>Socio-Cultural and Political Contexts for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and their Families</b> On campus and online (hybrid), May 20-June 3; May 20-23 on campus
<b>Course 2</b>	<b>Communication, Language and Cognitive Development: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants and Toddlers</b> Online, June 6-July 29, 2011
<b>Course 3</b>	<b>Leadership Perspectives on Families with Deaf or Hard of Hearing Infants and Toddlers: Their Cultures and Communities</b> Online, Fall 2011 (dates TBA)
<b>Course 4</b>	<b>Strategies for Developing Communication, Language and Cognition for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants and Toddlers</b> Online, Spring 2012 (dates TBA)
<b>Course 5</b>	<b>A Developmental Approach to Programming for Infants, Toddlers and their Families</b> On campus and online (hybrid), May 2012 (dates TBA)
<b>Course 6</b>	<b>Individualized Capstone Experience</b> Field Based (dates TBA)



For more information, please contact Beth Benedict ([Beth.Benedict@gallaudet.edu](mailto:Beth.Benedict@gallaudet.edu))  
or Marilyn Sass-Lehrer ([Marilyn.Sass-Lehrer@gallaudet.edu](mailto:Marilyn.Sass-Lehrer@gallaudet.edu)).

deaf and hard of hearing people on the interdisciplinary team are a central focus of this program.

The newly revised program, provided through on-line learning, including two short on-campus seminars, includes six courses that address the knowledge and skills that all professionals working with this population should possess. (See page 49 for program sequence of study.) The program focuses on the acquisition of knowledge and skills in four broad content areas:

1. Professional and ethical practices
2. Communication and language
3. Families, cultures, and communities
4. Developmental assessment and programming

Units of instruction are developed and taught by professionals with expertise in working with infants, toddlers, and their families from a wide array of disciplinary backgrounds. Bilingual ASL and English principles and philosophical perspectives influence the curriculum content and delivery of coursework and experiences. An emphasis on ASL and English is infused in the on-line instruction, and courses provide information and resources professionals need to support families and young children as they acquire both ASL and English in the early years. Each course is offered for graduate or professional studies credits.

### Conclusion

Gallaudet University recognizes the need to support interdisciplinary programming and currently offers programs that provide elements of interdisciplinary teaching and learning. The University is undergoing an investigation of how interdisciplinary programming can be enhanced to meet current and future needs. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and Families: Collaboration and Leadership Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program is designed to fill critical gaps in training. Professionals working with this population rarely have specialized preparation that covers the early

developmental needs of young children while providing families with the information and support they need to ensure that their young children have a healthy start and the foundations for later learning. A recent survey of professionals (Sass-Lehrer et al., 2010) asked about the professional training needs in their state. One responded:

*My best guess is that 50 percent of the 0-3 population is served {in my state} by individuals...who have never seen or talked to a deaf or hard of hearing person beyond the age of 6....*

In another context, one mother shared her experiences with early intervention services and the lack of deaf professionals:

*When we found out our daughter was deaf, we began early intervention services. There was no mention of the Deaf community, ASL, or deaf schools and the resources they provided. The only deaf person we knew was our child. It was through our own search that we stumbled upon these valuable resources. After we made these connections, our family's lives became much easier and our daughter's language began to flourish. Deaf professionals employed in every level of EHDI services and the resources that deaf schools provide are a critical missing link in today's early intervention programs. Parents deserve to have all the resources,*



information, and tools necessary to raise their deaf children. (Benedict, 2011).

The Gallaudet certificate program hopes to change this situation by providing an accessible preparation program through on-line learning. The program aims to attract professionals who are already providing services and want to improve, expand, or update their knowledge and skills as well as those who are pursuing professional degrees and are interested in working with infants, toddlers, and their families. The program expects to increase the number of deaf and hard of hearing professionals so that families and young children have more opportunities to learn what it means to be deaf and what families can do to ensure that their babies are off to a good start.

### Resources

- Crais, E. R., Boone, H.A., Harrison, M., Freund, P., Downing, K., & West, T. (2004). Interdisciplinary personnel preparation: Graduates' use of targeted practice. *Infants and Young Children*, 17(1), 82-92.
- Joint Committee on Infant Hearing. (2007). Year 2007 position statement: Principles and guidelines for early hearing detection and intervention programs. *Pediatrics*, 120(4), 898-921.
- Stredler Brown, A., Moeller, M. P., & Sass-Lehrer, M. (2009). *Competencies for early interventionists: Finding consensus*. Presentation at Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Conference, Dallas, TX.

## References

- Beazley, S., & Moore, M. (1995). *Deaf children, their families, and professionals: Dismantling barriers*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Benedict, B., Crace, J., Hossler, T., Oliva, G., Raimondo, B., Richmond, M. A., et al. (2011). Deaf community support for families: The best of partnerships (Ch. 11). *National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management e-book: A resource guide for early hearing detection and intervention (EHDI)*. Logan, UT: National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management, Utah State University.
- Benedict, B. S., & Sass-Lehrer, M. (2007). The ASL and English bilingual approach: A professional perspective. In S. Schwartz (Ed.), *Choices in deafness* (3rd ed., pp. 185-221). Bethesda, MD: Woodbine Press.
- Burstein Leadership Institute. (2010). *Assessment report on student learning outcomes: Burstein Leadership Institute*. Washington, DC: College of Professional Studies and Outreach, Gallaudet University.
- Eleweke, C. J., & Rodda, M. (2000). Factors contributing to parents' selection of a communication mode to use with their deaf children. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 145, 375-383.
- Hintermair, M. (2000). Hearing impairment, social networks, and coping: The need for families with hearing impaired children to relate to other parents and hearing-impaired adults. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 145, 41-51.
- Hintermair, M. (2006). Parental resources, parental stress, and socioemotional development of deaf and hard-of-hearing children. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 11(4), 493-513.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. (2004). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. <http://idea.ed.gov>
- Jones, T., & Ewing, K. (2002). An analysis of teacher preparation in deaf education programs approved by the Council on Education of the Deaf. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 148(3), 267-271.
- Kilgo, J. L., & Bruder, M. B. (1997). Creating new visions in institutions of higher education: Interdisciplinary approaches to personnel preparation in early intervention. In P. Winton, J. McCollum, & C. Catlett (Eds.), *Reforming personnel preparation in early intervention: Issues, models and practical strategies* (pp. 81-101). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Marge, D. K., & Marge, M. (2005). *Beyond newborn hearing screening: Meeting the educational and health care needs of infants and young children with hearing loss in America* (Report of the National Consensus Conference on Effective Educational and Health Care Interventions for Infants and Young Children with Hearing Loss, September 10-12, 2004). Syracuse, NY: Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, SUNY Upstate Medical University.
- Meadow-Orlans, K., Mertens, D., & Sass-Lehrer, M. (2003). *Parents and their deaf children: The early years*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Mellon, A., & Winton, P. (2003). A study of interdisciplinary collaboration among higher education early intervention faculty members. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 25(3), 173-188.
- Rice, G., & Lenihan, S. (2005). Early intervention in auditory/oral deaf education: Parent and professional perspectives. *Volta Review*, 105(1), 73-96.
- Sass-Lehrer, M., Stredler Brown, A., Hutchinson, N., Tarasenko, K., Moeller, M. P., & Clark, K. (2010). *Knowledge and skills of early interventionists: Where are the gaps?* Presentation at Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Conference, Chicago, IL.
- Watkins, S., Pittman, P., & Walden, B. (1998). The deaf mentor project for young children who are deaf and their families. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 143(1), 29-34.
- Weston, D. R. (2005). Training in infant mental health: Educating the reflective practitioner. *Infants and Young Children*, 18(4) 337-348.
- White, K. (2006). Early intervention for children with permanent hearing loss: Finishing the EHDI revolution. *The Volta Review*, 106(3), 237-258.
- Winton, P., McCullom, J., & Catlett, C. (2008). *Practical approaches to early childhood professional development: Evidence, strategies, and resources*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.
- Young, A., & Tattersall, H. (2007). Universal newborn hearing screening and early identification of deafness: Parents' responses to knowing early and their expectations for child communication development. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 12(2), 209-220.